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ROSE AND DRAGON BOOKS

YOUNG CITIZEN SERIES

JOHN BRIGHT.



BY

BERTRAM PICKARD

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JOHN BRIGHT.

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ROSE AND DRAGON BOOKS

YOUNG CITIZEN SERIES

JOHN BRIGHT

A PEOPLE'S CHAMPION

BY

BERTRAM PICKARD

(Author of "A Reasonable Revolution")



WITH A FOREWORD BY

HELEN P. BRIGHT CLARK

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TO
THE MEMORY OF
W. L. R.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

These books are issued in the belief that Education, as an evolution of personality which should seek to evoke in human character the divine ideal, and to make of the body "the finest servant of the soul," must breathe, through deeds rather than words, a religion so fundamental in its unity, so vital in its fragrant blossoming and sustaining fruitfulness, that it will necessarily find expression in forms as various as are the infinite variety of the human countenance, and be strengthened by that noble intercourse and fellowship which are ever a source of inspiration and aspiration. It is hoped that—even as obscure runlets feed mighty rivers—they may play their part in uniting the English-speaking schools throughout the world, and drawing into closer sympathy of mutual understanding, the different orders of society; restoring to rightful honour the claims alike of manual labour and handicraft, and of a really international and popular art.

With the children lies the future, and if, in the plastic years of adolescence, virtue and courtesy touch their lives, as with warm and tender human

hands, through other lives radiant with the charm of high character and simple goodness—such goodness as that of Elizabeth Fry and Abraham Lincoln and “Our Hero of the Golden Heart”—who shall say how profound and far-reaching may be the effect?

St. George may yet slay his Dragon and the Secret Rose prove the symbol of an invisible empire, adorning the dwellings of that divine city which, through many generations, hearts faithful to duty seek to build on earth. Then at last may the civic virtues of the patriot found a co-operative fellowship wide as the world, and guard the shining gateways of “a city that hath foundations.”

ANNIE MATHESON.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

NO attempt has here been made to collect original material, but the author's aim has been to present the life of John Bright in such a simple manner that it will be clear both to young and old. Naturally, in so short a book it has been impossible to deal exhaustively with a life so full of incident. The aim has rather been to emphasise those events in the life of John Bright which prove his worth as a citizen and as a man.

Those who have read Mr. Trevelyan's magnificent biography will understand how much I am indebted to him both for fact and inspiration. I am very glad to acknowledge that debt here, as well as to thank him for his generosity in allowing me to take my frontispiece from his book.

I am also much indebted to Mrs. Clark, of Street, for several helpful suggestions in connection with this little sketch of her father's life.

BERTRAM PICKARD.

FOREWORD

I HOPE that this little sketch of my father's life so pleasantly given, may have some influence on young people who read it, and that it may lead them to appreciate those principles of Right and Justice that guided his public life, and the courage with which he advocated them.

In the difficult time of reconstruction before us, these principles are as much, if not even more, needed than at any time in the past history of our country.

HELEN P. BRIGHT CLARK.

*Mill Field,
Street,
Somerset.*

7 xii. '19

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JOHN BRIGHT*

CHAPTER I

BOYHOOD

ONE fateful August day, at the beginning of the last century, a host of men and women might have been seen assembling upon an open space near the outskirts of Manchester, known as St. Peter's Fields. From all the towns and villages round about they came, some marching to music, others walking in groups beneath swaying banners. A strange picture they must have made as they passed along, many carrying sticks, very many clothed in rags, and almost all revealing either in face or figure the marks of terrible poverty.

And why were they gathering together? you ask. That is a question which they themselves would have found hard to answer. The immediate purpose of their monster meeting was to frighten the Government into granting them the right to be represented in Parliament. But what in reality they sought, though they were unable to express it in words, was nothing less than a freer and fuller life, where there was room for body, mind, and spirit to grow. What

* I should like this series to be above mere party aims and to represent the highest types of personality in opposing political camps.—EDITOR.

they could and did express, was the unbearable nature of the conditions under which they lived, and their bitter hatred of those who enjoyed the comforts of life but were unwilling to share them with their less fortunate fellow countrymen who, they considered, were born to endure both toil and poverty.

Perhaps it is little wonder that the local magistrates, whose duty it was to keep the peace, were uneasy about the consequences of so large and menacing a meeting, though it is almost certain that if the affair had been allowed to take its own course, the crowds would have returned peaceably enough. This, however, was not to be; for, almost as soon as the chairman had begun to address the multitude, the magistrates unwisely ordered his arrest, and a body of yeomanry rode forward to do their bidding. The crowd made a lane for the soldiers to pass, but only to close up again after them, so that in a few minutes the troop of horsemen found themselves hemmed in and unable to move. It was then they made their fatal blunder. Instead of slowly forcing their way out of the crowd, they suddenly drew their swords, and, either through fear or folly, charged the people before them. Then followed a scene of wild confusion. Defenceless men and women fell beneath the cruel steel or were trampled under

foot by the rearing, plunging horses. The crowd broke and scattered, but not until some half dozen innocent victims had been killed and upwards of a hundred wounded. The arrest by the yeomanry of the leading demonstrators concluded an act of tyranny as needless as it was brutal: an act which fanned the flame of revolution throughout the country and has been recorded upon the page of history, to the undying shame of those responsible for it, as the "Massacre of Peterloo."

And while these terrible things were happening, not more than twelve miles away, our hero, who was then no hero at all, but just a delicate and timid boy of seven, was playing with his younger brothers and sisters about their home at Rochdale. Little did anyone dream, least of all the boy himself, that the day would come when he would stand forth as a champion of the weak and the oppressed, when his voice would resound through England like a trumpet, rallying the ranks of artisan and labourer in the fight for liberty and justice.

But, as we have said, there was nothing of this in the mind of little John Bright at the time of which we speak. No doubt, like other boys, he would sometimes think with wonder of the dim mysterious future, but he was much more interested in the things of the moment, for, since

his birth nearly eight years before, in the autumn of 1811, he had spent a happy and unclouded childhood.

The life at Greenbank, the home of the Brights, was quiet and orderly. On weekdays the father's time was mainly spent in his cotton mill, which stood quite near to the house. The mother was occupied with the affairs of the home, and the care of her young and increasing family, of which John was the eldest living. The children played about the house and neighbouring common, doubtless under John's leadership, or else were busy with their lessons in a cottage near by. On Sundays the main feature was their attendance at the Quaker Meeting for Worship, the Brights having been Quakers for many generations. John Bright, therefore, by right of birth, was a Quaker, or—as in later life he preferred to say—a “Friend,” meaning a member of the “Society of Friends.” Such he remained through life; and although he was often looked upon with misgiving by the older Friends, because of his active connection with politics, yet he was in reality a true Quaker, whether it were in the simplicity of his speech and manner of living, in the strict honesty of his business and public life, or in his broad human sympathies which took little account of the conventional barriers of class, creed, and race.

When eight years old, John went to a local day-school and later to a number of boarding-schools managed by the Society of Friends. At Ackworth, in Yorkshire, he found the Spartan methods prevailing somewhat trying, but he was much happier in a school at York where, to use his own words, he found "more of reasonable freedom," and learnt more, he says, in the two years spent there than in any other two years of his school life. It was at a school on the borders of Yorkshire and Lancashire, however, that he gained the greatest benefit, for there amongst the hills and moors he grew from a delicate and timid child into a strong and fearless boy.

Leaving school at the age of fifteen, he went straight into his father's mill at Rochdale. The influence of his early training had not been lost, but rather strengthened, during his life at school, and already the young John Bright was beginning to show something of those great qualities of heart and mind that were to make him a beloved and respected leader of men.

CHAPTER II

PREPARATION FOR SERVICE

THE years of John Bright's young-manhood (1827-1841) were at least as important, in their effect upon his character and outlook, as the preceding years. They were in fact the time of his true education, both in the narrower sense of contact with books, and in the wider sense of contact with the world. They were, moreover, the years when he formed most of those political convictions which he held with little alteration to the end. His life at this time was threefold. It was spent partly within the family circle at home, partly amid the business activities of the mill, and partly in the company of fellow townsmen who, like himself, were interested in the affairs of their town and country.

Three years after leaving school, John's life was shadowed for the first time by personal grief, when his mother, who had always been delicate, died in the summer of 1830. Her death was a great loss to the large family of boys and girls at Greenbank, but particularly to John,

who was old enough to know that he had lost in her, not only a loving mother but a counsellor and friend. It was just this wise and sympathetic counsel that was lacking in the years which followed, for Jacob Bright, her husband, though a kind father and respected by all, was yet unable to understand fully, and so to guide, the newer thoughts and activities of his clever children. This does not mean of course that he shared nothing of their life. He, too, was interested in the political events of the day, and very often on Saturday evenings he would listen with keen enjoyment while John read aloud to the assembled family the political news of the week.

In order rightly to understand the effect of John Bright's business training upon his life, we must remember that this was a time when the class distinction between employer and employed was yearly becoming more marked; when, increasingly, masters were coming to look upon their men, not as human beings but rather as machines. Fortunately Jacob Bright's mill at Rochdale was free from the taint of this growing injustice, being still small enough to admit of the master coming into personal touch with those whom he employed. We are told how on dark wintry nights he would stand, lantern in hand, at the door of his mill, directing the men

to accompany the smaller children to their homes ; and this is only one of many examples we could bring to show how kindly an interest "Owd Jacob," as he was often called, took in his workpeople.

Thus, when John came into the mill, he found himself in surroundings where the great ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity were at least not shamelessly trodden under foot. He was called simply John by his fellow workmen, among the more intelligent of whom he made some valued friends. In this way he came to know, at first hand, something of the point of view of men who, as yet, were allowed no share in the government of their country, and some of whom harboured bitter personal memories of Peterloo.

It was at the mill, too, in a room over the counting house, that John took his own education seriously in hand. Here, each morning before breakfast, he would lose himself in the realm of poetry, history, or biography. He read widely but always of the best, his favourite books being Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the Bible ; a copy of the former he often carried in his pocket, whilst the allusions to the latter in his speeches, and the simple beauty of his language, bear testimony to its deep and lasting influence.

Although the activities of John's leisure hours were in the main serious, it must not be supposed

that there was no lighter side to his nature. When we recall that he was powerfully built and fearless in character—it was humorously said of him that, had he not been a Quaker, he would have been a prize-fighter—we are not surprised to find that, as a young man, he was fond of swimming and cricket ; whilst in later life he became a keen angler and one of the best billiard players in the House of Commons. These hobbies, however, were never allowed to interfere with the more important business of life.

The years when John Bright was drawing near to manhood were years of unexampled storm in the world of politics. Only when the country had been brought to the verge of revolution, did the reluctant Houses of Parliament pass the Reform Bill of 1832 ; and so, by granting votes to classes hitherto politically powerless, calmed for a time the unrest in the country. On the night when the Bill passed its second reading in the House of Lords, John was travelling for the first time to London by stage coach—railways were then but little known—and was greatly thrilled, in common with other passengers, when the glad news was brought.

It was little wonder that, during this same exciting year, the young men of Rochdale should form a society at the meetings of which they

might discuss the affairs of the day ; and we who know of that room above the counting-house in Jacob Bright's mill, are not surprised to learn that it was the young John Bright who presided over the first meeting, and who on many later occasions astonished his fellow members by his wide and accurate knowledge.

His natural gift of eloquence soon became apparent, and he used it freely during these early days in the cause of Temperance, and in a local struggle against the enforcing of rates by the Church of England upon Nonconformists. For some time he wrote out his speeches, but after breaking down once, he took the advice of a friend, and spoke only from notes with an opening and concluding sentence.

Towards the close of this period of John Bright's life, two most important events befell.

The first was his meeting with Richard Cobden, who, during the year 1836-7, was fast coming to the front as a leader of the Manchester Anti-Corn Law Association, later to become famous in history as the National Anti-Corn Law League. They met for the first time to arrange a public meeting in Rochdale, and thus began an acquaintance which was to grow into one of the truest and noblest friendships of English political life.

The other event which was to bring into

John's life both joy and tragedy, came about in this way. It happened that, in the summer of 1838, John and two of his sisters were present at a gathering of Friends at Ackworth. By chance the sisters fell into conversation with a stranger, Elizabeth Priestman by name, a young Friend from Newcastle. They liked her so well that, as soon as they could, they ran to their brother crying half in jest, "Come here, John, we've someone who'll just suit thee." So true were these words, that before the end of the day John was in love, and in little more than a year Elizabeth had been wooed and won.

The first year of their married life, during which a baby girl was born, whom they named Helen, was a time of unclouded happiness. Then quite suddenly Elizabeth showed signs of consumption, and in less than two years from their marriage she passed peacefully away.

Cobden came at once to his broken-hearted friend, and after giving all the comfort that lay in his power, wisely determined to lead Bright's thoughts away from his grief. "There are," he said to him, "thousands of houses in England at this moment where wives, mothers, and children are dying of hunger"; after which words he advised Bright, when the first agony of grief was past, to come with him, when they would never rest until the Corn Laws were repealed.

There and then John Bright accepted the invitation ; and there, in the presence of death, the two friends made their vow of service, which was to mean new life and hope for thousands to whom the names of Cobden and Bright were as yet unknown.

CHAPTER III

THE ANTI-CORN LAW CRUSADE

TO understand the condition of England in 1841, and the nature of the Corn Laws, we must glance for a moment at the course of history during the previous sixty years.

In 1784 William Pitt the Younger accepted the office of Prime Minister at the early age of twenty-four. Progressive in thought, he introduced many far-sighted reforms, and doubtless would have introduced many more but for events in Europe which closed the door to political reform for half a century at least.

In the summer of 1789 began the French Revolution, to be followed by that struggle against Napoleon Bonaparte which was to end at last in 1815 on the field of Waterloo.

Revolution abroad had aroused a suspicion of the masses in the mind of the governing class at home; and the war had placed a burden of taxation upon the many, whilst benefiting the few. These last were the landlords and the farmers who, when England had been cut off

from the continent, and had been dependent upon her own insufficient supplies of corn, had benefited by the high prices resulting from the shortage.

At the close of the war, the landlords, who were all-powerful in Parliament, passed the Corn Law of 1815, which maintained their selfish prosperity by forbidding the entry of foreign corn into England until the price here had risen to a figure double that prevailing before the war.

Another cause of misery amongst the poor was the Industrial Revolution, by which we mean that amazing change following the invention of the steam engine which, during the earlier years of the century, transformed England from an agricultural into a manufacturing nation. This had meant the ruin of the cottage industries, and had forced the country-folk to evade starvation by seeking employment at low wages and under bad conditions in the new and rapidly growing towns. ¹

It is little wonder that in 1841 the country was seething with discontent which had been but little calmed by the limited reforms of 1832.

When, therefore, Cobden wrote to remind his friend of his promise of service, Bright decided to join at once in the work of the Anti-Corn Law League. ² He would much have preferred to remain for some time longer quietly

at Rochdale where he now took a leading part in the business, and where he found great delight and comfort in the company of his little daughter ; but because of the widespread misery around him, he felt that private wishes must give way to public duty.

Bright's labours for the League fell naturally into two parts, namely, his work outside and inside Parliament.

Before entering the House of Commons his life was the life of an agitator. He journeyed north, south, east, and west, addressing meetings night after night, meetings which grew ever larger, ever more determined in their demand that the Corn Laws should be abolished.

In the towns, where most of the League's earlier meetings were held, it was not difficult to convince the people of the evil effects of protection, that is to say of laws which increased the prosperity of the few at the expense of the many. Ruin stared business men in the face. The Corn Laws, which denied entry to foreign corn, hindered the outgoing of British manufactured goods, for these would have been taken in payment for corn had it been allowed to enter this country. Low wages and unemployment were the natural results of bad trade, and the conditions in some northern towns were so bad, that thousands reckoned their meals in penny-

worths of mutton and halfpennyworths of bread, whilst thousands more either were supported by the nation, or actually starved. In 1842 a meeting of employers was held in London, and a deputation was sent to Sir Robert Peel the Prime Minister. He refused to see it; where-upon several hundred respectable men of business, including John Bright, marched upon the House of Commons to protest against the Corn Laws. No wonder Sir Robert Peel looked strained and care-worn as he drove through their midst and received the angry cries of men who little thought that in a few years the statesman who seemed their greatest enemy was to prove their greatest friend, and who, moreover, that very year, was to introduce a budget which, though it left the Corn Laws almost untouched, was yet the forerunner of Free Trade.

In the country districts the work of the League was not so easy, because of landlord influence. Yet even here the principles of Free Trade grew slowly but surely. The case of the farm labourer was well put by a man at one of the meetings when he said, "I be protected and I be starving." Nor was the case of the farmer in reality much better, for though more prosperous than the labourer, high rents robbed him of the benefits of protection.

Thus the League became increasingly a power

in the land, and although it spoke mainly for those who had no direct voice in the government of the country, it became ever more respected and feared by Parliament, because of its vast organisation and the greatness of its leaders. There were several of these, some inside the House of Commons, and some outside, and certainly Cobden and Bright were the men to whom the people mainly looked for guidance. Powerful as individuals, together they were invincible. Cobden's power lay in persuasion; Bright's in the passion of his eloquence, which roused the righteous indignation of his listeners against oppressors, whilst raising the question at issue to a high moral level, above the petty aims of person or party. Their united strength lay in oneness of purpose and sympathy. There was no rivalry between them, and although Bright always admitted that Cobden was his Chief, there was nothing of jealousy in the admission.

In 1843 Bright's friends pressed him to stand for Parliament, believing that his presence in the House of Commons, where Cobden had sat since 1841, would greatly strengthen the League. Bright was unable, however, to grant their wish at once, for his brother Thomas, who carried on the family business when he was absent, lay seriously ill. There was no one else to take his

place, and had he died, John Bright would have been compelled to retire, for some time at least, from public life. Fortunately Thomas recovered, and Bright often spoke of his brother's ability and generosity which alone enabled him to remain in the service of his country.

Later in the year Bright sought election to Parliament at Durham, where he was successful. He made his appeal, not so much to the few electors, as to the voteless crowds who thronged his meetings. "I am a working man as much as you," he told them, and promised that his life-work should be the championing of the working class ; a promise which he fulfilled. 5

In the House of Commons he made few friends for many years, separated as he was from the great majority of the members by barriers of education and social position ; but he was not in the least overawed, and soon gained the respect of the House, both as an orator and as a man.

Bright's election was a triumph for the League, which daily grew in power. It was joined on the one hand by many from the Chartist organisation—a working men's movement which aimed to secure the vote for the so-called lower classes, but had failed through lack of leadership —, and on the other hand by certain leaders of the Whigs, a party roughly corresponding to the Liberals of our day. Just when it seemed

that the cause was won, the League, in 1845, received a temporary set-back. The reason for this was a period of better trade, brought about by good harvests and by the steps towards Free Trade which Peel had already taken. But it was only a short-lived improvement, for, in the autumn of the same year, heavy rain ruined the English harvest, and potato blight brought famine to Ireland. Peel saw that the Corn Laws must go if famine in England was to be averted. The League redoubled its agitation, and after a bitter struggle in the House of Commons, Peel abolished the Corn Laws in 1846.

Thus did a great statesman, who had pledged himself to maintain the Corn Laws, sacrifice both himself and his party to save his country; and thus was won, at last, the stern crusade in which John Bright had fought so wisely and so well.

CHAPTER IV

THE CRIMEAN WAR

THE years between the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854 were years of increasing prosperity, due, in large measure, to the newly established policy of Free Trade.

One of the most important reforms of this period was the Factory Act of 1847, which limited the working hours of women and children in factories to ten hours a day. That Bright opposed factory legislation for adults, is true; and experience has shown that his judgment was at fault. His reasons, however, were not, as his critics sometimes think, selfish; but were as follows. In the first place he thought there were other reforms more urgently needed; and secondly he believed that good sense and good feeling amongst those engaged in industry would secure better results than would interference by the State.

But John Bright's interest lay in winning rather than in opposing reforms, and already he was preparing to work for an extension of the

franchise, that is to say an extension of voting rights to those who as yet had no direct political power. This endeavour, together with the question of the government of Ireland and India, occupied much of his time and thought during these years ; but his views on all these points were so far in advance of his time, that many years were to pass before his labours bore any visible fruit.

Before the outbreak of war in 1854, Bright's private life had undergone some important changes. In 1847 he married Margaret Elizabeth Leatham who, like his first wife, was a Friend. The marriage brought him great happiness, together with the cares and responsibilities of a large family. The life at One Ash, John Bright's home at Rochdale, was, so we are told, as beautiful as it was simple ; and it was a great hardship both to John Bright and his wife that public life on the one hand and domestic cares on the other kept them apart so constantly. It was about this time also that Jacob Bright died, leaving John with increased business and family responsibilities.

Meanwhile, Lord Palmerston, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, was gradually drawing this country into the toils of war. His policy of interfering in the affairs of other nations was regarded by Bright with dislike and dismay. More than once the country was brought to the

verge of war, and at last, in the spring of 1854, England found herself at war with Russia.

Briefly, this had come about in the following way. A quarrel had arisen between Russia and Turkey because of the Czar's claim to protect the interests of the Christian population in Turkey. Russian troops had threatened Turkey with invasion. Representatives of the four great powers—England, France, Prussia, and Austria, had met at Vienna in order to settle the dispute. They had drawn up proposals known as the Vienna Note, which had been at once accepted by Russia. Turkey had not only rejected the Note, but actually had declared war upon Russia; whereupon England and France applauded her action and prepared to support her in the conflict.

The reasons put forward by the English Government were as follows: the fear of Russia as a menace to the peace of Europe, and the dislike of her autocratic government, together with the belief in the necessity of maintaining Turkey as a power of importance, in order to check Russian influence in the East.

Cobden and Bright opposed the war with all their strength. Bright's Quaker training had inspired him with a hatred of war; but he attacked the Government's action, not upon religious grounds, but upon those of national

policy. He argued that England was at war with the nation that had accepted her own proposals, whilst she was allied with the nation that had rejected them. He urged that the fear of Russia was an illusion, and that the talk about her autocratic government came ill from those who had allied themselves with a government as cruel and anti-Christian as the Turk, and a ruler as autocratic as Napoleon III. of France. There were few who agreed with him at the time, and fewer who had the courage to say so. To-day it is generally admitted that Bright was right and the war a blunder.

At the time, however, John Bright was hooted by his one-time friends, and insulted by the Press. But he could always command a respectful hearing in the House of Commons, and it was there that he now made some of his greatest speeches which will be handed down from generation to generation as amongst the noblest utterances of man.

On December 22nd, 1854, he rose to address a crowded and hostile House. He reviewed the causes and the conduct of the war. After charging the Government, and particularly Lord Palmerston, with the guilt of a wasteful and wicked conflict, he concluded as follows :—

“I am a plain and simple citizen, sent here by one of the foremost constituencies of the Empire, representing feebly,

perhaps, but honestly, I dare aver, the opinions of very many, and the true interests of all those who have sent me here. Let it not be said that I am alone in my condemnation of this war, and of this incapable and guilty administration. And even if I were alone, if mine were a solitary voice, raised 'mid the din of arms and the clamours of a venal press, I should have the consolation that I have to-night—and which I trust will be mine to the last moment of my existence—the priceless consolation that no word of mine has tended to promote the squandering of my country's treasure, or the spilling of one single drop of my country's blood."

During the winter the sufferings of the brave troops in the Crimea were intense, largely owing to bad management at home. In February, 1855, John Bright made the speech that was to become the most famous of all his orations. He appealed where before he had condemned, for his aim was to shorten the war rather than to chastise his opponents.

"I do not suppose" he said "that your troops are to be beaten in actual conflict with the foe, or that they will be driven into the sea; but I am certain that many homes in England in which there now exists a fond hope that the distant one may return—many such homes may be rendered desolate when the next mail shall arrive. The Angel of Death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear the beating of his wings. There is no one, as when the first-born were slain of old, to sprinkle with blood the lintel and the two sideposts of our doors, that he may spare and pass on; he takes his victims from the castle of the noble, the mansion of the wealthy, and the cottage of the poor and lowly, and it is on behalf of all these classes that I make this solemn appeal."

Palmerston, however, was deaf to appeal, and it was only after another year of war, when the great Russian fortress of Sebastopol had fallen, that peace came at last to this country.

During the past two years John Bright had borne the burden of anxiety and the abuse of his fellow-countrymen without flinching. But the strain had been great, and the return of peace found him so shattered in health that it was feared he might never regain his former powers.

CHAPTER V

THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

IT needed two years of rest from public duties to restore John Bright to health. Part of the time he spent in Southern Europe, and part in the Highlands of Scotland, where he beguiled the days with fishing, and drew in new life with every breath of the pure mountain air.

When he returned at last to his labours, it was to enter upon a new chapter in his political life. During his retirement he had been defeated in the General Election, at Manchester, owing to his attitude towards the Crimean War, but later had accepted the invitation of Birmingham, where he was returned to Parliament unopposed. It was in the Town Hall at Birmingham, after two years of silence, that he addressed once more a great meeting of his fellow-countrymen, and opened with his old-time vigour a new campaign for the extension of the franchise. In doing this he forfeited a place in the Government, which certainly might have been his had he wished. He took this course intentionally, having no ambition for the honours and influence that

a place in the Cabinet would bring him, and believing that he could best serve his country by preserving for himself that liberty of speech and action which he rightly judged to be his strongest weapon in the fight for peace and reform.

He chose wisely, for he could never have remained long in a Government presided over by Lord Palmerston, so different were their views upon national policy, whether at home or abroad. Indeed, only a few years after the Crimean War, England came dangerously near to war with France, her late ally, for no reason except that Napoleon III. was wrongly supposed to be hostile to this country. Happily war was averted by the ceaseless labours of Cobden and Bright, together with Gladstone, who did yeoman service for peace as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

But even a greater danger lay ahead when, in 1861, war broke out between the northern and southern States of America. For a long time it seemed that England would join forces with the South, which would not only have been disastrous to herself, but would have delayed the world's progress, for how long it is impossible to say. Before telling, however, of the American Civil War, and of the part John Bright played in keeping England out of the conflict, we may well pause for a moment to consider the weapon which

had proved in the past, and was to prove again, the most powerful of those he wielded—namely, his oratory.

An orator, if he is to be great, must be gifted not only physically and mentally, but also morally. John Bright was generously gifted in all these ways. He had a fine and commanding presence. No one could behold the leonine head, set proudly upon the massive shoulders, and be unimpressed. No one could watch the swift and expressive changes of eye and mouth, and remain unmoved. Still less could they listen without emotion to the music of that voice which, because of its strength and purity, was likened to a silver trumpet.

Bright's mental qualities were of no less importance. Endowed with a keen and logical mind, his broad sympathies and wide reading gave him a firm grasp of affairs, both national and international. A command of beautiful yet simple language, a sense of humour and of pathos, a capacity for clear expression which left no doubt as to what he meant, all these things helped him to convey to others, in the most effective way, the thoughts and ideals that were in his mind.

But far more important than either physical or mental gifts, was the moral and spiritual fire that glowed through all his utterances. It was

something greater than speech, greater than intellect ; it was made up of high purpose, of unselfish toil, of stainless honour, of dauntless courage, of faith in God and man ; it was, in one word—character.

The words “my life is in my speeches”—spoken by Bright himself in answer to some question about the writing of his life when he was gone—show how much of himself he had given to them. To thousands who heard them, they were an inspiration as well as a political education ; upon millions who have read them, they have had a lasting influence, so perfect are they in literary form, so full of the spirit of their author. What place they will occupy amongst the orations of all time, history will tell ; but this we know, that, with the exception of Gladstone, there was no one at that time to rival Bright as an orator. We will not try to judge between these two. It is enough to say that Bright’s enthusiasm for Gladstone’s oratory was boundless, and that Gladstone, speaking in the House of Commons, said of Bright’s, that it was the loftiest that had sounded within those walls for generations.

And now to return to the American Civil War. For some time past, the system of slavery had been gaining ground in the Southern States, until it had become the most important fact in

their social and industrial life. When, therefore, Abraham Lincoln, who was opposed to slavery, was elected President in 1860, the Southern States decided to break away from the Union and to set up their own government. War between the Northern and Southern States at once broke out.

There was great ignorance in England about the war, and especially about the true aims of President Lincoln. Much sympathy was shown here on behalf of the South, for the three following reasons. In the first place the South attracted support by being Free Traders, whilst the North was protectionist. Secondly, there were many Liberals, including Gladstone, who thought they saw in the South a nation striving for freedom and self-government, and who did not see that the issue at stake was that of slavery. Thirdly, there was the conservative and aristocratic fear that a victory for the North, where ideals of political and social equality were more generally accepted than elsewhere, might hasten the day of reform in England. It was this last influence that nearly succeeded in dragging this country into the war on the side of the slave-owners of the South.

John Bright saw at once that the question at issue was whether slavery should die or flourish, and straightway set himself the task of rousing

public opinion in favour of the North. He addressed large gatherings of working men all over the country, and showed them how their future hope of reform was bound up with the cause of the North. The cotton workers of Lancashire, at least, were quick to understand the true nature of the conflict. Although they were thrown out of employment owing to the fact that no cotton could leave the blockaded ports of the South, yet, rather than benefit themselves by helping the South, they were content to suffer the hardships of unemployment.

Gradually opinion grew in favour of the North. It grew much faster when, in October 1862, President Lincoln proclaimed all slaves free throughout the United States; and faster still when, later, the tide of battle turned in favour of the North.

Besides his speeches, John Bright did great service for peace and liberty by a correspondence he carried on with Charles Sumner, a member of the American Senate. Bright's letters were read at the meetings of President Lincoln's Cabinet, and gained for him the respect and admiration, not only of Lincoln himself, but also of a large section of the American people. In these letters Bright wrote of the position here in England, and counselled the North to avoid, at all costs, friction with this country. In the

earlier letters he expressed doubts whether they would be able to achieve their aim by force of arms, but, as time went on, he saw the hope of victory brighten, and urged that the North should make no peace until the curse of slavery had been crushed.

At last, in the spring of 1865, after a series of brilliant victories, the North triumphed. Then, one day, the terrible news passed through the world that Abraham Lincoln had been foully murdered. All men were shocked by the tragic tidings, and few felt the loss more keenly than John Bright.

CHAPTER VI

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE FRANCHISE

THE death of President Lincoln, deeply as it moved him, was only the least of three sorrows that came to John Bright about this time. In the autumn of the previous year his third son, Leonard, who was not quite six years old, had died suddenly at Llandudno, where the Bright family regularly spent their holiday ; whilst on the 1st of April, 1865, Richard Cobden had passed peacefully away. The accounts in his Journal of these two great losses are as beautiful as they are pathetic. The little boy who was laid to rest hard by the sea at Llandudno, was very dear to him ; and of Richard Cobden he writes : " The friend of twenty-five years is gone, and I can no more ask counsel of him, or give him help. We have striven together for freedom and justice, and have done something for both that cannot be undone. Henceforth, if any henceforth is permitted to me, I must work alone, but I feel as if I could do little more, for, as I looked into that vault at Lavington, it seemed to me

that half my public life was buried there. But I will thank God that I have had such a friend, and that I have been permitted to be the friend of such a man."

His personal sorrows, however, were not allowed to stand in the way of public duty. With even greater energy than before he threw himself into the struggle for the enfranchisement of the working classes. For many years he had held that the question of the franchise was of the very greatest importance. For a long time he had been practically alone in this belief, even Cobden having been somewhat lukewarm in his support. Between the repeal of the Corn Laws and the Crimean War there had been signs, both in and out of Parliament, that the question of Reform was not altogether dead; but the country as a whole was not yet awake to the need, and Lord Palmerston exerted an influence that made the work of reformers, for the time being, of little avail. Nothing daunted, however, Bright after his long illness, had re-opened his campaign for the extension of the franchise, with a firm belief in ultimate success. At a mass meeting in Birmingham he had outlined his scheme for Household Suffrage, a scheme which, to all intents and purposes, was to be adopted by Parliament nine years later. "The nation in every country" he said "dwells in the cottage,"

and went on to argue that government which did not secure "a fair share of comfort, contentment, and happiness among the great body of the people" was not worthy of the name. Then had followed the American Civil War which, together with other events, had roused public opinion in favour of reform. At the same time changes were taking place amongst the men who guided the affairs of State. Mr. Gladstone was rapidly coming to the front as a great leader, and it was a red-letter day in the annals of Reform when, on May 11th, 1864, he hinted in the House of Commons that he thought the franchise should be extended to the working classes. There were others, too, able and willing to follow Mr. Gladstone's lead, and when, in October 1865, Lord Palmerston died, the gateway to reform was opened at last.

The spring of the following year saw Gladstone's Reform Bill introduced to the House of Commons. It was a moderate measure, but even so it aroused the fierce opposition of the more conservative members amongst the Liberals, who, headed by Robert Lowe, united with the Tories in a bitter attack upon the Bill. The struggle was tremendous. Indeed it has been called "a battle of giants," for the men who bore the burden and heat of the fight—Gladstone and Bright on the one hand, and Disraeli and Lowe on the

other—were men of exceptional ability, and all of them masters of language. For a few months the battle raged with ever increasing intensity, but in June of the same year the Bill was thrown out, and for the time being the Conservatives were victorious.

But their victory was destined to be of short duration. The rejection of these moderate proposals raised such a storm of indignation throughout the country as had never been witnessed since the days of the Anti-Corn Law agitation. Monster meetings were held in various parts of the country, and John Bright once again passed through the length and breadth of the land, guiding and inspiring the people in their demand for reform. The key-note of his policy was struck in a speech delivered at the end of the preceding year, when he said, “I speak not the language of party. I feel myself above the level of party. I speak, as I have endeavoured to speak, on behalf of the unfranchised, the almost voiceless millions of my countrymen. Their claim is just, and it is constitutional. It will be heard. It cannot be rejected. To the outward eye monarchs and Parliaments seem to rule with an absolute and unquestioned sway, but—and I quote the words which one of our old Puritan poets has left for us :—

There is on earth a yet auguster thing,
Veiled though it be, than Parliament or King.

That auguster thing is the tribunal which God has set up in the consciences of men. It is before that tribunal that I am now permitted humbly to plead, and there is something in my heart—a small but an exultant voice—which tells me that I shall not plead in vain.”

Parliament reassembled early in the following year (1867) to find that the Conservatives, who had come into Office by rejecting Mr. Gladstone's Reform Bill, were themselves resolved to bring in some measure of reform in order to pacify the people. They put forward several half-hearted proposals which were withdrawn when it was seen that the House of Commons was not prepared to pass them. The party system seemed, for the time being, to have broken down. Conservatives, no less than Liberals, were divided. At length Disraeli on behalf of the Government, introduced a Bill which, when it became law, in August 1867, secured a far greater measure of reform than even Mr. Gladstone's Bill of the previous year would have done. Thus it came about that a Conservative Government, whose members had fiercely opposed reform less than a year before, was responsible for a Bill granting the principle of Household Suffrage. Exactly what forces had brought about this

strange event, it is impossible to say. There were many influences at work, not the least of which was the continuous and unselfish labour of John Bright both within and without the House of Commons.

The passage of the Bill was the crowning point of years of unpopular work carried out by Bright on behalf of the working classes. It was indeed the crowning point of his whole life, for it marked the triumph of the cause that was dearest to his heart, and it came at a time when he was beginning to feel something of the weariness and weakness that come with advancing years, filling him at times with a great longing for peace and quiet amongst the dear ones of his family circle.

CHAPTER VII.

CLOSING YEARS

NOW that the great cause of political reform was won, Bright found the temptation to retire from public life almost irresistible. He realised that his day was past, and that he had neither the will nor the strength to throw himself into new crusades. One thing, and one thing only, kept him at his public duties, namely, the claim which Mr. Gladstone urged when in December 1868, he became Prime Minister. John Bright felt that to desert Mr. Gladstone, by whose genius the franchise battle had been fought to a victorious end, would be to desert those Liberal principles for which he had laboured, just when they were to become the guiding principles of English statesmanship.

Very much against his will, therefore, he accepted a place in Mr. Gladstone's Cabinet, becoming President of the Board of Trade. He fulfilled this office conscientiously, but his instincts and training alike unfitted him for the routine work of a Government Department.

His real service to the Government lay in his tremendous influence in the country. At this time he was almost certainly the most popular man in England, and his popularity was not just with the working classes, but with all sections of the community. Even the aristocracy were now forced to admit that John Bright had often been in the right when they had been in the wrong ; and his favour with the Queen was very real, for, in spite of his democratic principles, he had many times defended the Queen in public, thus winning her gratitude.

The Liberal term of government under Mr. Gladstone has been called " the Liberal harvest," because of the many reforms achieved whose seed had previously been sown by Bright and others. Bright himself, however, was only able to play a small part in the harvesting. The fierce labours of the last few years had told upon his strength, and in February 1870, he was forced to give up all public duties, though he did not actually resign from the Government until December of that year. He suffered even greater exhaustion, both of mind and body, than during his former illness, and his age now made recovery more difficult. Nevertheless, in 1873, he was able to resume a place in the Government, and later, when the Conservatives had come into power once more, he showed something of his

old-time vigour in opposing, side by side with Gladstone, the foreign policy of Disraeli which had brought England to the verge of war with Russia.

In 1878 John Bright suffered a great personal loss by the death of his wife. We are told that after her death he grew visibly older and seemed to take less interest in life. Yet once again, in 1880, he joined Mr. Gladstone in Office, because of his sense of duty towards, and his admiration for, that great statesman. But his membership of that Government was only of short duration ; for, when the British fleet bombarded Alexandria, John Bright felt he could no longer support a Government who were pursuing in Egypt a policy of Empire-building by force of arms. He resigned his post, therefore, and never took office again.

Thus at last was his life-long desire realised—namely, to live apart from the storm and stress of public life, amongst the people of his native town whom he loved so well. But it was too late to enjoy to the full the pleasures of a peaceful home life. Many of his nearest and dearest had passed away. Many were married, with homes of their own elsewhere. So that the closing years of his life were touched with sadness which was deepened by differences of opinion with some of his most intimate political friends.

But we will not dwell upon the sad side of the picture. Rather let us look for a moment upon the happy and the beautiful, for there was much both of happiness and of beauty. John Bright during the eventide of his life was often surrounded by his little grandchildren; and how he must have loved them we can tell from some words he spoke in the House of Commons about his own children. "When I can get down to my home from this House," he said, "I find half a dozen little children playing upon my hearth. How many members are there who can say with me, that the most innocent, the most pure, the most holy joy which in their past years they have felt, or in their future years they have hoped for, has arisen from contact and association with our precious children?"

His love of books, too, was very great, and he spent much time in his library reading and re-reading his favourite authors. "What is a great love of books?" he once asked; and answering the question himself he said—"It is something like a personal introduction to the great and good men of all past times."

Nor must we forget to speak of his love for animals, particularly for dogs. He is said humorously to have affirmed his preference for the company of an intelligent dog rather than that of a dull man. We are told how, during

his last illness, his little Scotch dog "Fly" "was always on his bed, never willingly leaving the room . . . till the end came." We are told how this little dog companion "was a constant source of pleasure to him during those long months," and how "her head received the last caresses of the dying hand when all other power of expression was gone."

And so in this beautiful manner, on the morning of the 27th of March, 1889, John Bright passed peacefully away. He was laid to rest in the little graveyard of the Quaker Meeting House at Rochdale, where many old friends from far and near gathered to pay their last tribute to a great man. But those present were only the representatives of a mighty host of men and women, not only of one class, but of all classes, not only of one nation, but of many nations, who mourned the loss of a friend, strong yet forbearing, courageous yet tender-hearted, constant in the search for Truth, unselfish in the service of his fellows.

APPENDIX

LIST OF CHIEF DATES.*

1811. *Birth of John Bright.*
1815. Battle of Waterloo.—Corn Law Introduced.
1832. Parliamentary Reform Bill.
1836. *Bright first meets Cobden.*
1839. *Bright marries Elizabeth Priestman.*
1841. *Death of his Wife.*
1843. *Bright enters Parliament for Durham.*
1846. Repeal of the Corn Laws.
1847. Factory Act.
1847. *Bright marries Margaret Elizabeth Leatham (second wife).*
1854-6. The Crimean War.
1856-8. *Bright's First Illness.*
1861-5. The American Civil War.
1865. *Death of Richard Cobden.*
1867. Disraeli's Reform Bill.
1868. *Bright joins Gladstone's Government.*
1878. *Death of Bright's Second Wife.*
1880. *End of Bright's Political Career.*
1889. *Death of John Bright.*

* Italics represent the more personal events.

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